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THE MUSICAL TIMES, And Singing Class Circular.

JUNE 1, 1867.

THE MUSIC OF THE ENGLISH CHURCH.*

BY G. A. MACFARREN.

(Continued from p. 51.)

HOWEVER inappropriate the revival of Pagan music for the purposes of Christian worship; however contrary to the design of Ambrose and Gregory, who successively introduced and perfected the use of the Greek musical system in the Western Church, as being the newest and best musical system of which they could obtain a knowledge; however popish the general associations with the so-called Gregorian tones, in the minds of all who have not traced them to their classical source; there is still reason for the continued employment of those particular passages which have held place in our Service since the missionaries of Gregory brought first their form of Christianity into England, and which constitute therefore the lasting links between the corrupted Church and the reformed, the Roman and the Anglican. This reason is, not that the musical passages in question are ancient, not that they belonged to another, or an earlier, or, even let it be admitted, a purer form than ours of Christian worship; but that we have heard them, ever and always, from the first to the last time we witness the performance of cathedral service, and that we consequently associate them with all our impressions from that even yet, enfeebled though it be, most solemn ceremonial. We hear them now as we have been ever wont to hear, and hence they bear to us, not the aspect of antiquity, but the character of revered familiarity.

The passages under consideration are those fragments of the Plain Song which are sung to the Preces, the Versicles, and the Litany. The knowledge that these identical phrases of melody formed part of the religious rites in the Roman temples which stood upon the very ground now occupied by many of our cathedrals; the knowledge that these identical phrases, appropriated from heathen to Christian use, were sung in the early, if not the primitive Church, were sung when that Church was corrupted, were sung when that Church was reformed, and are sung now when, musically speaking, it stands more than ever in need of reform; the knowledge that these identical phrases have, under the rule of classic Rome, of Christian Rome, and of English independence, ever formed the song of religion; this knowledge indeed invests them with associations which fail not to affect all hearers. But how are these associations disturbed, how is our veneration for the hallowed held insulted, when we learn that the Plain Song has been tampered with, perverted, profaned, and that the majority even of musicians, not to say of the clergy, know not in what part of the score it should be sought.

In the earliest written harmony that is known of the Plain Song, the ancient melody stands in the tenor part, which is defined as *Canticus Ecclesiasticus*, or the Church Part. The same is the case in the earliest harmonisations for congregational use of Hymn tunes. There needs not to point further, in proof of this, than to Cranmer's version of the Litany harmonised in five parts, published in 1544; to the Preces, Versicles, and Litany, harmonised in four parts by Tallis, published in 1564, or, according to Dr. Rimbault, in 1570; and to the earliest printed collections of Psalm or Hymn tunes. Let them who know, forgive the repetition of what may be familiar, for the sake of any who know not, when I state how this said Church Part was distributed in performance and what was the musical effect of such distribution. The congregation, male and female, led by a sufficient number of the Choir, sang the Plain Song in unison and octaves, while the rest of the choir sang the other parts of the harmony. Now, it is one of the many phenomena of acoustics, that, in a progression of octaves, under certain conditions, the sound of the lower notes absorbs that of the higher, which give brightness and clearness to the melody, but raise it not to their acuter pitch; and this is still more conspicuous when the duplicated melody is accompanied with harmony, than when its octaves are unenriched by other sounds. In exemplification, the effect may be cited of certain combinations of organ stops, and in the orchestra, to the duplication of a bass passage by the violas. Even more remarkable is it, and more unvarying, in the case of male and female voices than of instruments. With them, when there is the same average number of the two sexes, each singing in the same relative register as the other, one needs to see to be assured that the upper voices sing. As a frequently accessible illustration of the fact, reference may be made to the second verse of the chorale in Mendelssohn's *Hymn of Praise*, which is sung as here described, against the moving counterpoint of the orchestra. The grand sonority thus produced, the massive richness of tone, the penetrating prominence of the melody, is indisputable; and the particular effect of the absorption of the upper octave in the lower, must be equally obvious to every attentive listener. Greatly interested in this remarkable fact, and desirous to test it under various circumstantial conditions, I have profited by any opportunity of proof, and find that, whether with the accompaniment of the orchestra or of other voices in harmony, the male quality is always paramount. In the case of orchestral combinations, it seems to be essential to this effect that the scale—to use the word in an organ-builder's sense—of the lower octave be larger than that of the higher; thus, I have known the pitch of the oboe or clarinet, notwithstanding its utter dissimilarity of quality, to be lost in that of the violas and violoncellos in unison, and many like examples might be adduced. In the case of vocal combinations, I speak of choral, not of solo performances; the personality is obvious of each singer in a quartett, wherein the voices of a soprano and a tenor singing in octaves are heard as giving forth distinctly different sounds, whereas the masses combined in a chorus to yield one amalgamated body of tone in which the notes of no individual performer, any more than the manner, can obtain prominence. The experience that is within our almost daily reach is a manifest warrant for the effect of those per-

* In reply to several enquiries, let me state that the five only hymn tunes sung by the New Englanders for eighty or ninety years after the landing of the *Mayflower* at Christmas, 1627, were—York, Hackney, Windsor, Dundee, and Martyrs. I am indebted for this information to M. D. Conway, Esq., whose lecture at the Royal Institution on New England, detailed many other interesting points of the social history of the first North American colonists.

formances of three centuries since, in which the tune defined as the Church Part must have acquired infinite majesty from its all-powerful predominance, in which this majesty must have been enhanced by the investiture of harmony which delicately shone around it like a glory, and which as a whole must have been so impressive, so solemn, so sublime, as to inspire the obtusest of witnesses with the loftiest feelings possible to their natures.

The disregard of Church music in the first days of the Stuarts, whereof there was bitter contemporary complaining, is strangely and strongly attested by the alteration of Tallis's setting of the *Preces*, &c., now commonly used in most of our cathedrals. In this alteration, a fifth part is added to the harmony, to accommodate which, the Plain Song is sometimes inverted from the tenor to the soprano part, or more frequently omitted altogether. The alteration is the work of a minor canon of St. Paul's in the time of Charles the Martyr, Barnard by name, and was printed under the rule of that monarch in 1641. This alteration proves that the Plain Song had lost its respect, had lost its universal use, had lost its pre-eminent position as the Church Part, before the Stuart dynasty had been forty years upon the English throne; since, had it still held its prevalence in the voice of the people, it could not then have been shifted from its original situation in the score, or partially omitted thence, or, as one cannot but infer, wholly ignored by the re-arranger. This alteration proves further that, in the time of Charles I, nine years short of a hundred from the date of the first printing of Marbeck's adaptation of the English text to the Plain Song, a minor canon of the Cathedral of London was either calmly indifferent to the preservation of that remnant of antiquity, or was without accessible means for its verification; since, had Barnard been desirous to perpetuate the purity of the Plain Song, or, being desirous, had he been able with the means at his command to discriminate it, the Plain Song itself would not have been mutilated in his alteration of Tallis's arrangement.

Barnard naturally bears the blame of the mutilation here noticed; but, is he not in some sort the scape-goat of his time, is he not the representative of the rapid corruption which, under the auspices of the sovereign who is now revered for his firm support of the dignity of the Church of England, had already crept into one of the most important elements in her Service? That which we blame in Barnard or in the times of which his work is the sign, we must excuse, however we lament, in his successors of the present day. I have heard of more than one living cathedral organist, who, knowing nothing of the Plain Song, wholly uninformed that this constituted the Church Part in the performance of service, having a disrelish for the antique harmony of Tallis diluted by Barnard, being desirous to assimilate this to the music of modern production, and having a Precentor who would not control or could not direct him, has taken for a *canto-fermo* the top line of Barnard's alteration of Tallis's counterpoint, written entirely new harmony under this, and thus altogether expunged the venerable *Cantus Ecclesiasticus*, which, however deformed, however obscured, however ignored, had till then still dragged on a degraded existence in the secret recesses of a tenor part, with an average of from one to four voices to keep it alive in daily performance.

The zeal excuses the want of antiquarianism in the organists of—well, the cathedrals shall be nameless. Candour must either commend the desire to improve what to them appeared barbarous; and candour must also admit that where the melody of the Church Part had no outward manifestation, something more than technical musicianship was needed to divine the fact that such a part had being. The last newest corruption, however, of the archaic song of the Church, admits of no excuse; neither incapacity nor ignorance can justify its perpetration. It is a pollution of ancient usage, done in sheer wilfulness, which no ignorance of the original, no incapacity to perceive its purpose, can defend or so much as explain. We can account for the mutilation of the then forgotten melody of the Plain Song by Barnard; we can forgive its utter rejection by some unnamed living organists; they knew not the melody when they heard it, they knew not that such a melody had ever been heard. On the other hand, who is there, learned in music or unlearned, that can fail to distinguish between melody and monotone, or who can doubt that the introducing of inflections of melody or harmony into the latter is a perversion? Language cannot then be too strong, invective too violent, in deprecation of the breaking up of the monotone for the Confession by interspersing it with fragments of harmonised melody, which has recently come into practice, and which, because perhaps of some pretence of prettiness is growing widely in acceptance.

Whether by design, which to me seems more than likely, or by one of those rarely fortunate chances which sometimes adjust proprieties with such certainty as points to a natural necessity for their existence; the opening of our Service, with its long-continued monotony, graphically illustrates the humble abasement of the people while listening to the Minister's exhortation, while avowing their own direllections and their own contrition; and the beautiful fitness to the occasion is admirably prolonged when the monotonous alternation of minister and people first gives place to melody in the supplication for the leave of the Divinity to shew forth his praise. Here then should be sound reason for the objection to this recent interspersing of the people's confession of their sins with fancy phrases of melody and harmony, lighter and brighter in their character than anything that for a long while follows them, which interrupt as much the solemnity of the entire office, as they distract the attention of the assembly. Thus much as to the impropriety of any, the slightest, modification of the time-honoured monotone for this portion of the Service; something further must be said, and very much further might be said, as to the unmeaningness in reference to the text, so capricious as to border on profanity, of the choice of words for this musical variegation. Let me not be deemed irreverent in adducing, as one instance of glaring incongruity between sound and sense, the breaking forth into symphonic song at the words "Like lost sheep," which suggests if anything, and all music is suggestive, that there is something sweet and harmonious in our error and our strain, something charming in its recollection, something gladsome in its acknowledgment. Such suggestion is strangely discrepant from the symbolism of the old low doors of the churches which warned the worshippers to bow in meekness when they entered the hallowed building. I refrain from citing other

phrases, all of which are open to condemnation, on like grounds of senselessness to this I have quoted; I leave to the devotional feeling, to the poetical perception, to the common sense of every unprejudiced thinker to consider the utter unfitness to the signification of the words, of these apparently accidental musical outbursts, and I am certain that all will recognise the grossly false declamation which even so inconsiderable an observer as myself cannot avoid noticing. Let one technical comment have space among these æsthetical remarks; the harmony employed for the phrases in question, however attractive, however good of its kind, and I freely own its merit and its effective vocal distribution, is so essentially modern in character, is so totally distinct in style from what succeeds to it, that its insertion in the place where it occurs sounds as a pane of newly-stained glass will look, if introduced, with all the gaudy gaiety of its fresh colouring, in the midst of an antique painted window whose hues had been mellowed by centuries.

As to the undesirability, upon artistic, upon historical, and upon ecclesiastical views, of restoring the so-called Gregorian musical system to standard use in the English Church, much may be added to what has often been urged, and this may be again and again repeated with ever-growing urgency, until the well-intentioned men who pursue this object be convinced of its fallacy. There is a total difference, however, between reproducing what has been lost for ages and correcting inaccuracies that obscure what has been professedly in constant use—between resuscitating what has been buried in the oblivion of centuries, and purifying that which, though unnoticed and even ignored, has ever been supposed to continue in practice, from the mouldy fungi that have crusted about it. Many persons have supposed the music to be the entire composition of Tallis, knowing nothing of Barnard's alteration, which is habitually sung to the Preces, Versicles, and Litany; many have supposed the soprano part we are accustomed to hear to be the Plain Song upon which Tallis constructed his counterpoint; many have not concerned themselves with any supposition on the subject, nor given to this any heed whatever, but all feel in the music appropriated to these portions of the Service a something distinct from the thoughts of our common life, all recognise in it what they have ever heard in the same situation, and all yield to the sense of reverence with which, because of its strangeness of character and of their lifelong familiarity with this music in these places, it fails not to impress them.

It would then be well to respect to the utmost this sense of reverence, nay, to enhance it, by fully correcting the means by which it is prompted. The Service of Tallis, as originally published, is to be obtained in modern print, which furnishes ready facility for the correction of prevalent abuses. Let any congregation be enabled, and so induced to sing its own proper part in this arrangement of the Service, whether monotone or melody, let an efficient choir support and decorate with Tallis's counterpoint its performance, and the grand effect this must produce will be an example so attractive as to incite the emulation of whomever, wishing well, can distinguish well from ill.

(To be continued.)

WE once heard of a composer who declared that he would set the London Directory to music if he could only find a publisher for it. Such instances as this must, we imagine, be extremely rare, for we continually find ballad writers at a loss for what they usually call "words;" and we may accept this as a proof, therefore, that composers are desirous of wedding their music, if not to "immortal verse," at least to something which may pass current with intelligent listeners during the brief period of existence which such productions usually enjoy. With this laudable desire every real artist will cordially sympathize; but in the present day it must be clearly seen that in the endeavour to give a meaning to the songs especially intended (like the razors in Peter Pindar's tale) "to sell," there may be a real danger of merely using the music as a means of gilding a number of moral pills for family use. The composer in this case must inevitably sink beneath the poet; and the poetry never being of a remarkably high order, the dead level of mediocrity brought to bear upon the manufacture of this article is somewhat depressing to contemplate. As long, however, as music of this class depended upon its own intrinsic and unaided merit for a sale, there could be little chance of its affecting in the slightest degree the real world of art. Ladies might lisp out sentimental inanities in a drawing-room; and admiring listeners might be melted into a moral rectitude of conduct without music, in fact, having anything whatever to do in the matter; but when we find artists of even the highest class not only lending their names to grace the title-pages of these effusions, but actually singing them in public, to the exclusion of the perfect works of art which lie around them, it is time to protest against such a desecration of ability and power; and it is the duty of all interested in the progress of music to do so on every occasion that offers itself. There is a great deal of nonsense talked and written in the present day about music for the "domestic circle;" and in our late strictures upon "drawing-room music," we endeavoured to prove that no real difference exists between compositions suited for the drawing-room and those suited for a concert-room, save that difference which is obvious to all, viz., that certain works require large orchestral and choral resources, for which a small space is not suitable. If this title, therefore, be really invented to pass off flimsy productions which are merely intended for the music-market, it would be a satisfaction to art-lovers to think that in public, at least, they are safe from the infliction of listening to them. Music written for "home" should certainly stay there: like other home-made manufactures we could mention, they may be very apt to disagree with strangers; and cynical bachelors are always cautious even of purchasing anything labelled as a good "family article." We can have no possible objection to "old arm-chairs," or "family spectacles" being glorified in song: we may tolerate even stories of pretty girls' "secrets"—affect an interest in an unknown lady's "choice," and "bridal"—or even sympathize with the timid admirer who "will not ask to press that cheek;" but we must insist upon it that such compositions should be kept for family consumption, and not be introduced, by undue influence, into the public concert-room. Were the method adopted to force a sale for these productions a secret, we might hesitate to give it publicity; but it is thoroughly known; and all who support it must have fully prepared themselves for any hostile criticism which the system may provoke.